

Business information by fax

Richard Poynder

Describes the emergence of fax-delivered business information services, categorises the variety of types, and provides a directory of services.

• Introduction

There are now said to be some 37m fax machines installed worldwide. And this figure is growing rapidly: Dataquest forecasts the number of machines installed in Europe will reach 6.3m in 1993, with some 850,000 in the UK alone. Current annual growth rates are 6.3% in the UK and 8% in Europe. In the US there are expected to be 10.5m machines by the end of the year, with a current growth rate of 15%.

Most people now consider the fax machine to be a fast, efficient and user-friendly communications tool. Nevertheless, the survey of readers of *Business Information Review*, published in this issue, discovered that only 18% of respondents regularly use fax-based business information services.

There have, of course, been a number of serious attempts made to establish the fax as a significant force in the delivery of information services. Unfortunately, the very public failure of some of these services has helped foster cynicism with regard to the possibilities of fax delivery. The most public failure was that of Mercury's Faxess service: launched at the 1990 International Online Information Meeting, Faxess had, by autumn 1991, already been discontinued, having managed to recruit only two information providers.

A further inhibiting factor is the inflexibility of the UK premium-service tariff structure. Currently the highest rate an information provider can charge is 48p per minute. This operates as a disincentive to provide high-value fax information services by means of premium lines, particularly as half the revenue generated is retained by BT. Not surprisingly, therefore, many services operate on a subscription basis, or require the setting up of an account prior to use.

Nevertheless, with the installed base of fax machines growing rapidly and fax becoming more of a personal business tool as an increasing number of fax cards are installed directly into PCs and more busy executives buy machines for their homes, the fax appears to be coming of age as a legitimate means of delivering business information.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Until recently Richard Poynder worked in the Marketing Department of British Telecom Business Information Services, which is responsible for promoting a portfolio of online databases via BT Messaging Services. He now works as a freelance writer, specialising in electronic information services.

This development is likely to be boosted by other factors, including the continuing quality improvements to fax technology, the increased number of plain-paper fax machines being installed (growing at an annual rate of 35% in the UK, say Dataquest), the falling costs of fax-on-demand technology and developments in voice recognition technology.

• Getting the formula right

Fax information services can be viewed in two ways. That is, as an alternative delivery mechanism for information available by other means (post, online, CD-ROM, microfiche, telex or courier) or, increasingly, as a service in their own right.

Information providers are discovering, however, that the secret of success is in providing services that take full advantage of the ease-of-use, immediacy and presentational qualities of fax. The information also needs to be fairly brief - successful services are often condensed versions of time-critical information from hard copy publications, delivered prior to publication. Alternatively, it needs to be information that is exclusive to the fax service, or hard to obtain elsewhere.

Dun & Bradstreet's fax option, for instance, is simply one of a number of delivery mechanisms for its reports. Its experience, however, bears witness to the possibilities of fax delivery when it is taken seriously by the information provider. In 1989 around 2% of reports were sent by fax. In 1990 D&B's fax services were automated, with all requests being handled by a computerised faxing system. Since then, orders for delivery by fax have grown substantially: some 10% of their reports are now faxed to customers - in the region of 12,000 reports a month. The new system also takes advantage of the ability of fax to transmit graphical representations not available via telex or online systems. For instance, D&B's Payment Trend Profile includes an automatically generated graph, which is created at the moment of transmission from the figures held on the database.

Alert Publications, on the other hand, offers a range of industry newsletters that are only available by fax. These are one-page bulletins of condensed stories culled from a wide range of relevant publications. The strength of the service rests on the number of sources scanned, the brevity of the information contained and the speed with which it can be delivered, thus allowing busy executives to keep abreast of their industry without the need to read dozens of trade publications.

- **How it works: delivery mechanisms**

Broadcast fax services

One way of delivering fax services is by broadcasting periodic information updates to a regular user base. This usually takes the form of daily, weekly or monthly industry newsletters or country reports. Alternatively, it may be occasional updates on product developments to a known customer base.

Such services usually operate on a subscription basis and are often time-critical. For instance, Metal Bulletin operates a daily fax service called Fast Track with concise information on major events in the world's metals markets over the past 24 hours. Other services may provide information not readily available elsewhere in the UK. For example, Broadfax, a Swiss company, publishes a range of business-oriented fax bulletins covering events in several eastern European countries.

A broadcast service comes into its own when it includes a profiling system. The European Commission Host Organisation (ECHO), which runs the TED database (containing invitations to tenders for public contracts in European countries) offers a Profile service for those seeking European business opportunities. The subscriber's business profile is checked daily against the TED database. Should its profile fit, any new tenders they are immediately faxed with the details. Such a service provides a very real benefit to the user, who would otherwise need to visit a European Documentation Centre weekly and scan the relevant supplement of the *Official Journal*.

Another such service is First!. Provided by Individual Inc., First! publishes industry newsletters covering a range of hi-tech and other industries. Users supply a profile of their interests and Individual's smart software searches a large number of electronic information sources. The results are then checked against customers' profiles and daily personalised newsletters are compiled and faxed (or e-mailed) to them, with each customer receiving only information that matches his/her personal profile.

Fax-on-demand services

The other main delivery mechanism is fax-on-demand. This allows users to search on a remote database, either by calling an automated computer system with a voice-driven menu (which prompts users to select particular documents by tapping in unique number sequences via a touchtone telephone or fax), or by dialling specific phone numbers for individual documents. In both cases, the required documents are then faxed immediately to the user, either during the same call (one-call mode), or by the fax-on-demand system calling back the user's fax machine shortly after (two-call mode).

Users of fax-on-demand systems will normally need to make a preliminary call in order to pull down an index of the information available and the relevant codes or phone numbers for each document. Some systems will also require users to input a PIN number for billing and/or security purposes.

One example of a fax-on-demand system that operates a voice-driven menu using two-call mode is D&B's DunsVoice. Users call the DunsVoice number, insert their PIN, and then select the report they want by keying in numbers on their phone or a fax machine with a telephone handset in response to a series of voice prompts. They then input the fax number they want the report to go to and hang up. The report is faxed to them within the hour.

Faxbase Europe, in Birmingham, operates a number of fax-on-demand services. These include a service for members of the Birmingham Chamber of Commerce. Using the system, members can obtain more detailed information on articles published in the current issue of the Chamber newsletter. It also allows them to pull down application forms for events organised by the Chamber. Additionally, Faxbase Europe runs a number of premium-rated services. This includes information on local facilities for visiting business people and, currently undergoing Beta testing, a Personal Rail Planner, which will advise users on the best route and connection options for travelling by train in the UK.

One information provider operating a fax-on-demand service with unique numbers for each document is the Central Statistical Office. The service, Statfax, allows users to obtain a range of macro-economic statistics, from the retail prices index to gross domestic product statistics. The service operates in one-call mode, so users pay the full price of the call, at premium rates.

- **Types of information available**

It is now possible to receive a wide range of business information by fax.

Industry newsletters

As we have seen, fax is increasingly being used to deliver newsletters. These need to provide time-critical information or information that is either exclusive to the newsletter, difficult to source elsewhere or that offers condensed summaries from other sources.

Jane's Newsfax Service provides a weekly single-page newsletter containing condensed headline stories from the forthcoming issue of *Jane's Defence Weekly* thus offering subscribers advanced details of stories to be covered.

Alternatively, a hard copy publication may offer a fax service that provides time-critical sections of forthcoming issues in advance of publication. Thus *Contract Journal* offers a service called Project Link, where the Business Alert supplement of the journal, which lists new work opportunities for the construction industry, can be faxed six days prior to publication of the hard copy version, on payment of an additional subscription.

Summaries/individual sections of newspapers

A number of services provide faxed summaries or sections of newspapers. These are particularly useful for business people or information departments that need to keep a close eye on particular companies or industries, but have little time available to scan all the relevant newspapers themselves, especially foreign publications which are not readily available.

A number of North American newspapers issue condensed summaries of their publications by fax, including the *New York Times* and Canada's *Globe and Mail* newspaper. Even more comprehensive, City Digest, a London company, can provide a weekly fax with a condensed summary of all the financial and business information from every UK Sunday newspaper. It also includes an index of the companies mentioned to facilitate quick scanning.

And the *London Evening Standard* runs a premium-rated fax-on-demand service that allows users to pull down the business section of the paper - particularly useful for those living outside London.

City information

Not surprisingly, several fax services offer time-critical City information. Used to their best effect, these utilise the ability of fax to send charts and graphs.

Services range from the TeleShare service operated by *The Daily Telegraph*, providing stock market and USM prices via a premium-rated fax-on-demand service, to the *FT*'s Cityfax service, which combines an FT Analysis company report with an FT Graphite share price chart and a set of McCarthy Information press cutting cards.

Other services available include a company monitoring facility via Extel Newsfax, which combines the resources of Extel's Regulatory News with its Examiner service - customers select the companies they are interested in, the names are registered on Extel's computer and, as soon as a relevant news item appears on any of Extel's newswires, the details are automatically faxed to the user; and Chart Analysis, which offers a number of services providing daily news on the Footsie and the currency, gold and interest rate markets.

Country information

A number of services now provide country information. As well as the previously mentioned Broadfax, the BBC provides, as an off-shoot of its broadcast monitoring activities, a Tailored Services facility for the business community. Subscribers to the service can obtain reports on topics (eg mining, manufacturing and businesses) or countries. These are available either as verbatim transcripts, or summaries, within minutes of the broadcasts, or as daily, weekly, or monthly updates. The information can be delivered in almost any form, including fax. Currently the BBC covers 135 countries and collects over one million stories a year.

Product information and technical support

Fax-on-demand is a popular way of providing product information and technical support. Both Microsoft and Lotus run such systems in the UK, as do Novell, Intel and Compaq. Users can call up and select from a library of documents containing product news and announcements, technical help sheets and upgrade information.

But such services are not restricted to hi-tech products. One company, Floorfax, runs a service that provides the owners and managers of carpet shops with 24-hour access to manufacturers' stocks. This offers retailers the opportunity to obtain immediate, accurate information on what stock is available, while the customer is in the shop.

Company information

Most suppliers of company information will deliver documents and reports by fax if requested. Ironically, although company information providers have shown considerable creativity in supplying information in different online formats, many are inflexible when it comes to faxing information. Somewhat unconvincingly, this is justified on the basis that people do not generally need company information very quickly.

This lack of flexibility is demonstrated in the pricing arrangements. For instance, where CCN charges users £1 a page extra for faxed information (except where users have requested a full report, when the charge is waived), Companies House charges £20 for each document. This can drive the price of a Full Report up to £120 and, not surprisingly, only about 0.3% of the documents ordered from Companies House in the first quarter of this year were sent by fax (compared with 10% at Dun & Bradstreet, where the average surcharge for fax delivery is £5).

The quality of the faxed reports also varies considerably, depending upon whether the information provider simply sticks photo-copied sheets manually into a fax machine, or runs an automated system that provides for direct digital transmission from a host computer.

Tax and legal information

Tax and legal information is also well suited to fax services, either by allowing users access to a database of legal or tax opinions via a fax-on-demand system, or by means of newsletters providing updates on recent changes to the legislative environment or to particular cases of relevance.

Two such services operating in the US are Westfax and TaxFax. Westfax offers legal professionals access to millions of court opinions. It operates as a fax-on-demand service and, with legal documents all identifiable by means of a standard code, it is easy for users to select any case by simply punching in the relevant case number.

TaxFax, on the other hand, operates as a broadcast service. Users pay an annual subscription and receive a daily tax publication covering news, key tax developments and brief summaries of every tax document released in the previous 24 hours.

A wide range of other types of information

A wide range of other services can supply information of use in the business environment. HMSO's Scanfax service, for instance, provides fax delivery of official EC documentation; as we have seen, the Central Statistical Office's Statfax offers the latest macroeconomic statistics; and the Meteorological Office's Metfax service provides weather and satellite pictures. All three of these are fax-on-demand services, charged for by means of premium rate 'phone numbers.

• **The benefits**

There are, then, a number of real benefits to having information delivered by fax. It allows for immediate access to information (and in most cases is available on a 24-hour basis) and the fax is a user-friendly communication tool with which most people working in a business environment are familiar. In effect, fax offers the ability to interrogate remote databases without the need to learn complicated search languages (although, as we shall see below, the searching capabilities are by no means sophisticated).

Additionally, unlike telex and online services, fax is able to transmit graphs, diagrams and charts. If appropriately edited, fax services can also provide extremely useful alerting services, particularly for busy people who have to keep abreast of the business press or have to monitor industries where there is a superfluity of information. And for those in

need of technical information it can be a way of avoiding busy telephone lines trying to get connected to a technical helpdesk.

- **The drawbacks**

There are, of course, some drawbacks. There are also situations where fax delivery is just not relevant. For example, users are unlikely to get excited about a service that can deliver within the hour if they do not need the information immediately, particularly if it involves receiving long reports that keeps their fax machine busy during peak periods.

Paper quality is also an issue, especially if the information is to be included in a presentation, or archived: fax paper looks shoddy and fades over time. (Obviously, this will be less of a concern for those with plain-paper machines).

The method used for faxing the information is also relevant. Poor quality photo-copied documents manually inserted into the fax machine will not arrive looking smart, particularly if your phone line is not crystal clear and you tend to receive fuzzy faxes. Similarly, some newsletters are now printed in such small fonts that it is hard to read them, even when transmitted digitally direct from a PC.

Moreover, fax machines are prone to running out of paper at the wrong time, although many now have memories that record the contents of fax messages received while the machine was unable to print. Fax machines can also get very busy during peak times. This can be a problem when time-critical information is being sent, as most broadcast systems work on a priority system - if the fax cannot be delivered within, say, five attempts, it is likely to be put to the back of their queue.

There are specific problems with fax-on-demand systems. The sophistication of voice-driven menus limits users' ability to search a database. Since the alpha characters were removed from UK phones some years ago, the only way particular documents can be identified is as numeric strings. In essence, this means pulling down an index, redialling the system and then identifying a particular document, or series of documents, by tapping in its numeric code. Fax-on-demand systems also require the user to have access to a touchtone phone, or fax machine.

Those systems, like MetFax, that allocate a separate number for each document held are simpler to operate than voice-menu systems. However, many UK fax machines are not programmed to switch automatically to polling mode when the START button is pressed and many users do not know how to place their fax machines into polling mode. Additionally, some machines will not dial unless they have a sheet of paper in the transmit tray.

However, with manufacturers now working on voice recognition systems we can expect to see these problems overcome in the future. At the point where a user can call up a system and simply tell it the information wanted, fax services will have entered a new chapter in their history.

- **Pricing**

Most fax services work either on a subscription basis, or on a pay-as-you go arrangement. Others will use some form of per-use billing, with users invoiced on a monthly, or quarterly

basis. Alternatively, charges may be billed to their credit card. In addition, fax-on-demand services often operate on premium-rated lines.

In general, there is no real price advantage to receiving information by fax. In some cases, it is quite the reverse, with financial penalties attached to having the information faxed. In general, however, prices tend to be comparable with receiving the information by other means. In other words, users should look for benefits other than financial ones when considering fax services.

- **Services available**

Listed below are some key providers of fax services in the field of business information, with a description of the services they offer and some indication of their charges.

Alert Publications

Alert Publications offers 53 edited information newsletters in the field of Aviation & Space, Computing & Telecomms, Construction & Property, Entertainment & Publishing, Food & Drink, and Metals & Minerals. Each title takes a global view of its subject and is edited by an expert in the field.

The editor scans relevant publications and condenses key news and comment into a one-page bulletin. Those needing further information on any particular story can consult Alert Publications' Back Up Library, from where further details can be faxed through at no extra cost. Each title is produced between 25 and 100 times a year and costs between £95 and £380.

Further information: Dr Alexander Reid, Alert Publications, 8 Crinan Street, London N1 9SQ. Tel. 071-239 7764. Fax 071-833 9351.

BBC Tailored Services

As part of its monitoring activities, the BBC now offers a range of Tailored Services. These allow companies, the media, charities, governments and researchers to receive tailored country (or topic) reports, delivered by a number of means, including fax.

Those using the service pay a monthly £200 subscription, plus £12 per story, regardless of length. Discounts are available for a number of types of organisation, including charities and universities.

Further information: Marian Martin, BBC Monitoring, Caversham Park, Reading RG4 8TZ. Tel. 0734 469215. Fax 0734 463823.

Broadfax

Broadfax offers country reports on Russia, Poland, Hungary and the Czech and Slovak republics. These cover economic, legal and political events and are distributed twice a week. A subscription costs 300 Swiss francs for three months and 955 Swiss francs for a year. There is a 10% discount available for multiple subscriptions.

Further information: Albert Reynolds, Reynolds & Associates Ltd., Innovation Centre, University of Reading, Reading RG6 2BX. Tel. 0734 756373. Fax 0734 756374.

CCN Businessline

CCN's Businessline offers the opportunity to order from a variety of company reports, including a Registered Office and Company Profile report, a Small Business Credit Check, a Status Report and a Financial Analysis. These can be delivered in a number of ways, including fax.

The service also offers information on directors and a Constant Review service, where users are updated on any new developments on a company, including judgements, change in directors and new filed accounts.

Prices for the service vary according to the information required, from £8 for registered details, up to £95 for CCN's Diamond Service (status report plus Risk Index, directors database search, accounts and constant review for three months). In addition, users are charged £1 per faxed page, which is waived for reports.

Further information: Julia Gannon, CCN, Abbey House, Abbeyfield Road, Nottingham NG7 2SW. Tel. 0602 863864. Fax 0602 861657.

Chart Analysis

Chart Analysis offers daily fax information on the Footsie and the currency, interest rate and gold markets. The commentary and recommendations are based on Technical Analysis and the service costs £2,000 per annum for the currencies and interest rate markets and £1,900 for the Footsie and gold faxes.

Further information: David Kerly, Chart Analysis Ltd., 7 Swallow Street, London W1R 7HD. Tel. 071-439 4961. Fax 071-439 4966.

City Digest

City Digest provides a comprehensive summary of the financial and business information extracted from all sections of the Sunday newspapers, separated into news, features, comment and share tips. It also contains an index of all companies mentioned. Copies are delivered on Sunday afternoon within the Central London area, or they can be faxed directly to an office or home number. Prices range from £299 for a quarterly subscription to £985 for an annual subscription.

Further information: Roger Lewis, City Digest Ltd., 38 Charlotte Street, London W1P 1HP. Tel. 071-631 0274. Fax 071-255 1543.

Companies House

Companies House can provide a wide range of information on companies. In most cases, customers simply want a company search, which gives three years annual returns and accounts and other key documents, including Articles of Association and mortgage details.

Fax delivery is available, but at a cost of £20 per document it is an expensive option for those in need of more than one document. A full report, for instance, is six documents, giving a total cost of £120.

Further information: Central Enquiries, Companies House, Crown Way, Cardiff CF4 3UZ. Tel. 0222 380801. Fax 0222 380900.

Dun & Bradstreet

D&B offers a wide range of company information. This is available by means of its telephone service, DunsTel, its DunsPrint service, its D&B Access service or by its automated voice service, DunsVoice. All these services offer fax delivery and costs range from as little as £5 for a credit assessment to £40 for a full analytical report on a company. These prices can be substantially discounted for regular users. Users may pay an additional cost for fax delivery.

Further information: Carl Needham, Dun & Bradstreet Ltd., Holmers Farm Way, High Wycombe, Bucks HP12 4UL. Tel. 0494 423345. Fax 0494 422260.

Evening Standard CityFax

By calling a series of premium service numbers it is possible to obtain the full Business Day section of the *Evening Standard*. The following numbers are available, depending on the edition required: First edition, 11.30, 0839-300 411; Second edition, 12.30, 0839-300 412; Third edition, 2.00, 0839-300 413; Fourth edition, 4.00, 0839-300 414; Fifth edition, 5.15, 0839-300 415. Calls are charged at 36p per minute cheap rate and 48p per minute at all other times.

Further information: CityFax Helpline: 071-413 9595.

Extel Newsfax

Extel Newsfax offers a company monitoring service. Combining the Regulatory News and Examiner services, Extel allows users the opportunity to monitor companies they are interested in. This includes all news reported to the London Stock Exchange and other general news affecting the companies concerned. Prices for the service start at £1,575 per annum for up to 15 companies.

Further information: Andrea Boyle, Extel Financial Ltd., Fitzroy House, 13-17 Epworth Street, London EC2A 4DL. Tel. 071-251 3333. Fax 071-490 2667.

Faxbase Europe

Faxbase Europe operates a number of fax-on-demand systems, including a service for the Birmingham Chamber of Commerce that allows users to obtain additional details of articles published in the current newsletter, a Business Visitor's Guide to Birmingham and, soon to be released, a Personal Rail Planner, enabling users to plan rail journeys between any two UK stations. With the exception of the Chamber of Commerce service, which is available for local chamber members only, all services operate at premium rated lines. The cost is 36p per minute cheap rate and 48p per minute at all other times.

Further information: Richard Webster, Faxbase Europe, Box 2963, Sutton Coldfield, West Midlands B74 4AW. Tel. 021-323 2269. Fax 021-323 0248.

FAXSummary

FAXSummary provides four pages of condensed versions of Canadian news articles from the current issue of *The Globe and Mail* newspaper. Fifty per cent of coverage is business news. It is published five days a week and transmitted to subscribers at 11pm the night

before the paper appears in print. Prices outside North America range from \$20 for a single issue, to \$300 for a monthly subscription and \$3,000 for an annual subscription.

Further information: Donna Hymers, Globe Information Services, 444 Front Street West, Toronto, Ontario, Canada, M5V 2S9. Tel. 010 1 416 585 5662. Fax 010 1 416 585 5249.

First!

Supplied by Individual Inc, First! is a daily industry newsletter, covering a number of hi-tech industries and the aerospace, automotive, energy and pharmaceutical and biotechnology industries. First! is biased towards US sources, but obtains information from a large number of international newswires and information providers, including Business Wire, Knight Ridder, the *Financial Times*, Reuters and the Kyodo News Service. In conjunction with Individual, users agree a profile of their information needs and then receive daily personalised newsletters, by fax, email or Lotus Notes, containing between five to 20 stories relevant to their agreed profile.

The cost of the service depends on the number of articles received each day and the number of readers, but starts at around £5,000 per year for fax or email delivery and rises to around £10,000 to £12,000 per year for delivery by Lotus Notes.

Further information: Ted Howard-Jones, Individual, Cedar Court, 9 Fairmile, Henley-on-Thames, Oxfordshire RG9 2JR. Tel. 0491 579600. Fax 0491 579750.

Forexia Fax

For those who need information on the currency markets, Forexia (UK) Limited publishes a daily fax newsletter which covers the four major currencies (sterling, Deutsche Mark, Japanese Yen and US Dollar). The newsletter consists of comment, forecasts and recommendations for these currencies and is delivered five days a week, by 8am. Subscriptions range from £174 for 20 issues (approximately one month) in the UK (£191 for other EC countries and £209 elsewhere) to £1,450 for 250 issues (about one year) in the UK (£1,625 for other EC countries and £1,972 elsewhere). The information is also available as an online service and via Prestel CitiService.

Further information: Charles Ranald, Forexia Fax, 149 Petersham Road, Richmond, Surrey. Tel. 081-948 8316. Fax 081-948 8469. A sample newsletter and application form are available by fax on 081-332 7426.

FT Cityfax

FT Cityfax is a service that combines an FT Analysis company report with an FT Graphite share price chart and a set of McCarthy Information press cuttings. The service is available for any major European quoted company and costs £75 (plus VAT). Alternatively, users can order a combination of two of the components for £60; or a single Analysis Report for £33 and a single Graphite Chart for £41.

Further information: Marilyn Tidmarsh/Judy Marlow, McCarthy Information, Unit 10, Old Silk Works, Beech Avenue, Warminster, Wiltshire BA12 8LX. Tel. 0985 215151. Fax 0985 217479.

Jane's Newsfax Service

Jane's Newsfax Service is a weekly single page issue of leading headline news stories that will be printed in the forthcoming issue of *Jane's Defence Weekly*, the publication that covers global defence issues. The information is faxed 24 hours prior to the magazine being published and several days before postal delivery. Those interested in a particular story can request to have the complete text faxed to them for an additional charge.

An annual subscription to the service costs £96/\$165. Existing subscribers to *Jane's Defence Weekly* pay the reduced rate of £72/\$113.75. Articles subsequently faxed in full text are charged for at £5/\$9 each - billed on a quarterly basis.

Further information: Annabel Chisholm, Jane's Information Group, Sentinel House, 163 Brighton Road, Coulsdon, Surrey CR5 2NH. Tel. 081-763 2637. Fax 081-763 0596.

Metal Bulletin

Metal Bulletin offers three services. Fast Track and Steel Track provide a daily fax of concise information on major events in the world's metals markets during the past 24 hours. The Prices Service offers a wide range of metal and steel prices and exchange rates, which can be delivered as often as twice a day, or as infrequently as once a month. Prices vary according to individual requirements.

Further information: Prices Service - Mary Higgins, Metal Bulletin Journals Ltd., 16 Lower Marsh, London SE1 7RJ. Tel. 071-827 9977. Fax 071-928 6539. Fast Track/Steel Track - Adam Hooper, Metal Bulletin Journals Ltd., Park House, Park Terrace, Worcester Park, Surrey KT4 7HY. Tel. 071-827 9977. Fax 081-337 8943.

Met Office

The Meteorological Office provides a wide range of weather maps via its MetFax service. This now also includes satellite pictures. Users first need to pull down an index of what is available and then dial the number for the particular map they want. Calls are charged at 36p per minute cheap rate and 48p per minute at all other times.

Further information: The Met. Office, Sutton House, London Road, Bracknell, Berks RG12 2SY. Helpline 0344 854435. Fax 0344 854018. Fax Index Page 0336-400501.

MRC Databank

MRC Business Information is a company specialising in marine credit reporting. As part of that service, it produces commissioned status reports on shipping companies, including corporate details, business development history, a financial assessment, an account of the company's reputation, a general appraisal and a fleet list.

Once commissioned, these status reports are made available more widely by a number of electronic means, including a fax-on-demand service. Users are allocated a PIN which allows them to pull down reports on companies as and when required. The reports cost £125. Should the report raise any additional queries, a Databank Update is available, at an additional cost of £55, with delivery within a week.

Further information: Martin Notcutt, MRC Business Information Group, 5 Worcester Street, Oxford OX1 2BX. Tel. 0865 200202. Fax 0865 200509.

Project Link

Project Link is a fax service that allows subscribers to *Contract Journal*, the construction industry publication, to have the journal's eight-page new work opportunities section, Business Alert, faxed to them six days prior to publication. The service costs £200 for existing subscribers to *Contract Journal* and £280 for new subscribers.

Further information: Jackie Hanford, Contract Journal, Reed Business Publishing, Quadrant House, The Quadrant, Sutton, Surrey SM2 5AS. Tel. 081-652 4642. Fax 081-652 8958.

Scanfax

HMSO's Scanfax service provides fax delivery of official EC documentation. This includes the *Official Journal*, L, C and S series and COM Documents. The service costs 43p per page (plus VAT), with a minimum charge of £3.40 (plus VAT). Payment can be made by credit card, or via an HMSO account.

Further information: Mrs Jill Speed/Mr David Owen, Agency Enquiries, HMSO Books, 51 Nine Elms Lane, London SW8 5DR. Tel. 071-873 8220. Fax 071-873 8416.

Statfax

The Central Statistical Office's Statfax service provides 24 hour access to the latest macroeconomic statistics.

Users can access headline figures within a couple of minutes of the official release time of 11.30am. Shortly thereafter, the entire press notice is available, including tables and graphs.

There is no registration or subscription. The service costs 36p per minute cheap rate and 48p per minute at all other times. The following information is available by calling the numbers listed below: Retail Prices Index 0336-416037; Monthly trade figures 0336-416038; Balance of payments 0336-416039; Public Sector Borrowing Requirement 0336-416040; Index of production 0336-416041; Producer prices 0336-416042; Retail Sales Index 0336-416043; Credit business 0336-416044; Gross Domestic Product 0336-416045, and Economic statistics release dates 0336-416046.

Further information: Public Enquiry Service, Central Statistical Office, Room 65c/3, Great George Street, London SW1P 3AQ. Tel. 0336 416050. Helpline 0373 832656.

TaxFax

Tax Analysts, based in Virginia, USA, offers a number of publications aimed at the tax professional, in hard copy, microfiche, CD-ROM and online formats. This includes the TaxFax service, published every business day of the year.

TaxFax is divided into three sections: the Cover Page offers a quick summary of the day's most important news; News Highlights contains brief news stories covering key tax developments in the US; and Abstracts & Citations has brief summaries of every tax document released in the previous 24 hours. The service costs \$1,529 per annum.

Further information: Lorie Marsh, Tax Analysts, 6830 North Fairfax Drive, Arlington, Virginia 22213, USA. Tel. 010 1 703 533 4602. Fax 010 1 703 533 4444.

TED

The European Commission Host Organisation (ECHO) provides a Profile service whereby users can define a profile to be checked against the TED database on a daily basis. The database is an online version of the printed supplement S to the *Official Journal of the European Communities* and contains invitations to tender for public contracts, as well as contract awards and other tender-related publications. Information comes from the EC, GATT, EFTA and ACP countries.

Any tender notice that fits a user's profile is then automatically sent to them by telex or fax. The service is available in a number of languages and costs 2 ECU for each notice in short format, 3.5 ECU in standard format and 7 ECU for full format.

Further information: Patrick Müller, ECHO, BP 2373 L-1023 Luxembourg. Tel. 010 352 34981 204. Fax 010 352 34981 234.

Telecomms Today

Telecomms Today, from Telecomeuropa, is a daily newsletter on the telecommunications industry, with brief summaries of the latest news in the industry. An annual subscription to the service costs £295 in the UK, £435 in Europe and North America and £595 for the rest of the world. The service is also available on a pay-as-you-use basis via a premium rate fax line. Calls are charged at 48p per minute.

Further information: Peter Purton, 3 Prince's Buildings, George Street, Bath BA1 2ED. Tel. 0225 445282. Fax 0225 445283. Fax-on-demand access: 0336 416056.

TELESHARE

Teleshare is a fax-on-demand service operated by *The Daily Telegraph*, offering two price information services. The London Stock Market Bulletin lists the Top 100 share prices, plus stock market headlines and is updated on an hourly basis. The London USM Report lists all the leading USM prices, plus the USM market headlines. London Stock Market Bulletin 0839-401 232; London USM Report 0839-401 233.

TimesFax

TimesFax is a six-sheet synopsis of *The New York Times*, published 365 days a year and delivered by fax to over 45 countries around the world. It is designed and edited to provide the reader with a digest of *The New York Times*' top stories and editorial comment, with two pages devoted exclusively to business news.

The service costs \$130 per month for five-day delivery and \$180 per month for seven-day delivery. The fax is transmitted from New York at 10pm local time, in advance of the next day's newspaper.

Further information: Dan Barber, TimesFax, 130 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10011, USA. Tel. 010 1 212 727 4838. Fax 010 1 212 727 4802.

WESTfax

West Publishing, a legal publisher based in Minnesota, runs an automated fax-on-demand case retrieval service, WESTfax. Designed primarily to help legal professionals, the

service provides access to millions of US court opinions, from as long ago as 1754, right up to opinions handed down by the US Supreme Court the previous day.

The service is designed to be an alternative method of accessing West Publishing's WESTLAW online database and costs \$7 per opinion, plus \$1.50 per page, billed to the customer's own West account or to a Visa or MasterCard.

Further information: Christoffer Dordell, West Publishing Company, 610 Opperman Drive, PO Box 64526, St. Paul, MN 55164-0526, USA. Tel. 010 1 612 687 6819. Fax 010 1 612 687 5388.

• Conclusions

After a sluggish start, fax delivery of business information is becoming more popular. Growth is faster in the US, but we can expect to see the UK and Europe catch up over the next few years.

One factor holding back growth in the UK is the continuing inflexibility of the premium-service tariff structure. However, premium services represent only a small part of the market, with most services charged for either on a subscription basis, or by providing an account that allows users to obtain information on a pay-as-you-use basis.

In any case, there are several factors that are likely to encourage this growth, including improvements to fax technology, the increased availability of plain paper fax machines, the increasing number of home faxes and a raised awareness amongst users as to what is available. The development of voice recognition systems can be expected to have a significant impact on fax services, although efficient voice recognition systems are likely to be some years off.

For the moment, those considering fax services would be advised to consider carefully both the costs and the benefits. Although there are real benefits available in the right circumstances, users should first establish how much the service will cost, whether there is a more appropriate way of obtaining the information and, most importantly, how relevant that information will be. Fortunately, most subscription services offer a free trial period, so it is usually possible to test a service for content and quality before committing to a subscription.